

The mystery of the temple of Zeus at the sanctuary of Nemea

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The temple of Zeus at the sanctuary of Nemea has often been written off as a dull, inconsequential temple of the fourth century B.C. This article seeks to re-write the temple's reputation by arguing that the temple was designed to bolster the sanctuary's own chequered history during a period in which the sanctuary of Nemea was fighting for its survival. Religion and politics were fundamentally connected in the Greek world, as the story of the Nemean sanctuary shows.

When the pioneer travel writer, Pausanias, in the second century A.D., visited the sanctuary of Nemea, situated not far from the Isthmus dividing mainland Greece and the Peloponnese, he wrote a rather disparaging note for his guidebook. 'In Nemea', he wrote, 'is a noteworthy temple of Nemean Zeus but I found that the roof had fallen in and that there was no longer remaining any image [of the god]'. Today the temple still looks the worse for wear.

Nemea and its temple are dealt with swiftly in two paragraphs and Pausanias is off again on his travels. Nemea hosted Panhellenic ('all-Greece') athletic games, just like the sanctuaries of Olympia, Delphi, and Isthmia. Yet Pausanias devotes a much larger space in his guide book to Isthmia (book 1.1.3–2.2), an entire book of his guide to Delphi (book 10), and two books to Olympia (books 5 and 6). Nemea, it seems, was sadly lacking in tourist value.

In part, Pausanias wasn't interested because Nemea had a very chequered history as a sanctuary hosting crown games on a level with Olympia and the rest. It alone among these great sanctuaries sat in the middle of an often flooded marshland. No major city stood near the sanctuary to organize it and protect it. The sanctuary, and particularly its games, sat prey to the desires of more powerful nearby cities like Argos. Several times Argos stole the games hosted at Nemea and transferred them and the glory that went with them to its city. The Greeks, it seemed, hadn't cared much about Nemea, so why should Pausanias?

Coming out of the pits

This article is, however, about a period of time when the Greeks, or at least some of them, did seem to care about Nemea. The period in question is the second half of the fourth century B.C. The Greek world was in turmoil (when was it not?!). Sparta, so strong at the beginning of the century, had fallen. Athens was still engaged in desperate attempts to build a second empire. A new power was gathering strength to the north: Macedon. By 338 B.C., King Philip of Macedon's influence and power in Greece were un-deniable.

Philip liked the crown games sanctuaries. In a world without mass communication, in which most people stayed in their cities and got on with their own lives, the games provided almost unique opportunities for people from all over the Greek world to come together in 'neutral' places not directly controlled by one city. But for Philip they also provided good locations and events through which he could organize and manipulate the Greeks. It is thus not a surprise that the crown games sanctuaries all received some sort of attention from Philip, and the sanctuary at Nemea in particular received not only the crown games back from Argos at this time, but also was the recipient of a huge financial investment that saw, amongst other things, a new temple being built at the site, the same temple Pausanias saw and which we see today.

Is that an oracular pit I see before me?

The temple is not in itself particularly

exciting. In fact, for the fourth century B.C., it's a bit dull. Scholars refer to it as 'conservative' and 'modest'. They attribute it to an unnamed, local, architect and they bemoan its lack of pedimental sculpture. This was a century after the world-renowned Parthenon in Athens, fifty years after the building of the great temple at Delphi. Nemea, in comparison, looks like the ugly sister.

That is, apart from one thing. At the back of the temple of Nemea, there was a pit. Not just an empty hole in the ground, but a built stone pit with stone steps set into the wall so that people could (and still can) descend from the temple floor into the pit and back out again (ringed above, and see cross-section below). Normally, the back of a temple is used as a storage room for the gifts given to the god or goddess to whom it is dedicated, or even for the god or goddess' cult statue. Unlike today where the back of a building is often its most unimportant bit, the back portion of a Greek temple was its most sacred area. It was often the bit only priests could go into and was sometimes kept hidden from sight.

The presence of a pit descending 1.89 m into the ground in this most crucial area of the temple has thus, understandably, excited scholars of Greek architecture. More than that, it seems that the builders of the temple went to great lengths to make sufficient space for it. To fit this pit in, scholars have demonstrated that the builders of the temple seem to have moved the cult statue further forwards almost into the middle of the temple (into the cella), framed by an internal colonnade. So, just what was this pit for?

Scholars often have a knee-jerk reaction to pieces of architecture they don't understand. They are for 'ritual'. In the case of the Nemean pit – a sacred space deep in the ground – the chance to tie it to some form of oracular or chthonic (underworld) ritual consultation has just been too strong. The Nemean pit, it was claimed, was for the use of an oracle just like in the temple of Apollo at the crown games sanctuary of Delphi. Fine – except for the fact

that the oracle at Delphi probably didn't operate from a deep pit and that we have absolutely no evidence of there ever being an oracle at Nemea. The question becomes, can we offer a better solution to the mystery of the Nemean pit?

Pitting old against new

The crucial starting point for a re-evaluation of the pit is that its floor is on a level with the floor of the previous temple which stood on the site, dating back to the sixth century B.C. The new temple is built up on high foundations, which make use of a lot of material from the previous temple as foundation building blocks. This was typical practice: the Greeks did not chuck away material from a demolished building, but reused it as foundations, to save on money and labour costs. Within that context, the builders of the temple made a concerted effort in constructing the pit to ensure that some part of the original sixth-century temple was still in sight (of the priests and users of the pit at least). The builders thus ensured that there was a direct connection between the new and old temples, a connection that revealed the continuity of worship at the sanctuary (and not just revealed it, but more importantly created the potential for such a connection to exist and continue).

That same continuity was on display in the altar which lay to the east of the temple. By any standards, the altar is huge – well within the top ten biggest altars to have survived from ancient Greece. The Nemean altar's oldest part is sixth century, with later additions in the fourth century. Again the old and the new were placed side by side. Through the different building stages of the altar, visitors to the sanctuary were given a visible reminder that there had been a continuity of cult worship within the sanctuary.

Covering over the pit-falls of history

Why the need for this heavily-marked continuity? Earlier on, I stressed how the sanctuary at Nemea was often taken over by the nearby city Argos and its games annexed. Nemea for most of the fourth century had lain abandoned. Now, with the advent of Philip of Macedon and his interest in the crown games sanctuaries, Nemea had a new chance to shine. Yet it would seem that Nemea was equally keen to stress its age as well as its newness. By stressing the continuity of cult over time through, amongst other things, its altar and temple pit, Nemea stressed its importance to the Greeks throughout history and glossed over those unfortunate periods in which it had been laid aside. By connecting up sixth- and fourth-century Nemea

through its temple building, the sanctuary re-wrote its history and re-asserted its significance in Greece. At the sacred heart of the sanctuary, upstairs was new, downstairs was old.

Surrounding the temple, more trappings of newly-found success were visible. The sanctuary built a guest-house (a 'xenon') and bath complex soon after the temple, along with a brand new stadium slightly further away from the sanctuary. Each of these buildings also made clear architecturally the need to combine oldness and newness, to celebrate continuity as much as change. This was undoubtedly a strategy to save money, but it was also a particularly astute visual statement. Nemea was back. Even better, it had never been away.

The success of Nemea in its architectural face-lift lies beyond the scope of this article, but it was certainly short-lived. Nemea, after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., lost the games back to Argos again. The sanctuary was plundered to build a Christian basilica on the site after Rome's conversion to Christianity. But what is left tells us a fascinating story of a sanctuary determined not to be forgotten, which saw an opportunity to make a new, and defiantly egotistical, architectural statement about its history and importance.

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